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CRIME

Death's Hit Man

By MARILYN STASIO

“Maybe if he had one more drink they’d leave him alone.” That’s the chilling opening sentence of *THE GHOSTS OF BELFAST* (Soho, \$25), a first novel by Stuart Neville so bleak and despairing — “noir” in the genuine existential sense — it would rattle the composure of a saint. Gerry Fegan, the solitary drinker tossing back shots of whiskey and peering into the shadows for ghosts, is a hard man, an I.R.A. enforcer during the Troubles and still a legend in West Belfast. But unlike former colleagues who cynically retooled their skills for successful careers as politicians and crime bosses, Fegan is haunted by the people he killed — “12 of them if he counted the baby in its mother’s arms.” The ghosts who stare back at him with accusing eyes may be only manifestations of his own guilt, but they won’t let him alone until he takes vengeance by executing the men whose orders led to these deaths.

Once Fegan accepts his deadly commission and the assassinations begin, it’s not hard to read this disturbing novel as a blood-soaked thriller. (Neville not only draws out every gory detail of Fegan’s murders, he also takes relish in reconstructing the original atrocities that motivated them.) But that would do a disservice to Neville’s higher aim of protesting the reclamation and legitimization of unrepentant terrorists. Foot soldiers like Fegan are problem enough in modern-day Northern Ireland. “If there’s peace, if it’s really over, then what use are we?” one of these thugs wants to know. Of more concern, though, are the powerful men who orchestrated decades of brutal civil conflict and survived to make dishonest fortunes in peacetime. These are the men on Fegan’s hit list, and they don’t go down easily.

For something that reads as if it were written in a hellish fury, Neville’s novel is a coldly lucid assessment of the fragility of the Irish peace. Gerry Fegan may not be the brightest of bulbs, but he has the clarity of vision to see that men who operate entirely for their own gain and with total indifference to human life aren’t the best people to run a country. There’s neither rest nor redemption for this anguished antihero, who knows that despite all the ghosts he has avenged, there will be more waiting in the shadows.

If Neville’s nihilistic vision qualifies his novel as a rare example of legitimate noir fiction, what are we to make of all the “noir” story collections gushing from Akashic Books? In his introduction to *BOSTON NOIR* (Akashic, paper, \$15.95), Dennis Lehane advises us not to judge the genre by its Hollywood images of sharp men in fedoras lighting cigarettes for femmes fatales standing in dark alleys. Offering his own definition of noir as “working-class tragedy,” he writes persuasively of the gentrification that has eroded “the tribalism of the city” and left people feeling “crushed, attenuated, castrated” by “the Machine.” But that’s really a definition of good regional crime writing rather than the noir sensibility, which has more to do with a loss of faith, hope and outer direction so profound that the alienated antihero is moved to renounce all society and live entirely by his own moral code.

Patrick Millikin, the editor of *PHOENIX NOIR* (Akashic, paper, \$15.95), doesn’t even attempt a definition, going straight to the regional aspects of his choices. But as if to prove his witty claim that “sunshine is the new noir,” he offers one superb specimen, “Whiteout on Van Buren,” in which Don Winslow makes skillful use of a city street at high noon to provide the perfect metaphor for life and death in an in-different universe.

So, are we agreed that chick lit mysteries have pretty much run their course, elbowed out by sexier trends involving vampire detectives and blasphemous reincarnations of Jane Austen? That thinning out of the lightweight mystery field makes more room for real charmers like Susan Kandel's clever series featuring Cece Caruso, an amateur sleuth who lives in West Hollywood and writes biographies of dead mystery authors to support her passion for vintage clothes. Cece is researching a new book on the master of film suspense in **DIAL H FOR HITCHCOCK** (Harper, paper, \$13.99) when her life suddenly takes on the dimensions of a Hitchcock movie — of several Hitchcock movies, actually. After witnessing a murder in the ambiguous manner of Jimmy Stewart in "Rear Window," she checks into a creepy motel ("I needed a shower") and makes her way to other familiar film locales while suffering a loss of identity akin to Kim Novak's in "Vertigo." Despite the hectic pace of the movie-driven scenes, no vintage outfits are harmed in this caper.

With **THE LONG DIVISION** (Minotaur, \$24.99), Derek Nikitas bumps up the style requirements for writing crime fiction another notch. When Jodie Larkin steals \$5,000 from a home she cleans for an Atlanta housekeeping service and takes off in a stolen car to reconcile with the son she abandoned 15 years earlier, she sets in motion a chain of events that will eventually unite a group of strangers in grief. That takes some dazzling plot maneuvers, but Nikitas interlocks his fragmented story pieces in a way that makes everything seem inevitable — even the murders. At one point, we're following three different cars on three different roads, each a vehicular stage where frantic parents and their miserable children can act out their sad fantasies. As one disaffected daughter puts it to her dangerous new friend, "We can just get on the highway and keep driving south, somewhere warm where we don't have to think."

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